

# Separate and Unequal:

School Segregation of Romani  
Children in Slovakia

# Who are the Roma?

- Ethnic group
  - Mostly in Europe
    - Some in Asia and the Middle East
  - Originally traced back to Indian subcontinent
    - As early as 11<sup>th</sup> century
  - Arrived in Europe between 14-16<sup>th</sup> centuries
- Most Roma in Europe maintain social traditions and culture
  - Mostly nomadic until 20<sup>th</sup> century
  - Many dialects of “Romani” language spoken by Roma throughout Europe, although many (possibly most) speak the language of the country in which they live.

# Stereotypes, Discrimination, and Violence

- “gypsy”
  - Pejorative connotation
  - Stereotyped as lazy, criminal, immoral
- Historical persecution
  - World War II
    - The most targeted minority after Jews
    - 220,000 – 1,500,000 killed in Holocaust
  - Communist era
    - Forced assimilation and resettlement
    - Restriction of cultural freedoms
    - Forced sterilization of Romani women (Czechoslovakia)

# Roma in Slovakia today

- Estimated 500,000 Roma
- 1/3 live in impoverished settlements
  - Segregated from Slovak majority
    - Often on the outskirts of cities/towns
  - Often lack basic amenities
    - No running water, electricity
  - Substandard housing conditions
  - Poor sanitation

# Roma in special schools

- Disproportionately high percentage of Roma children assigned to “special schools”
  - “Special schools:” elementary schools designed exclusively for children with mental disabilities
  - 600 special schools
  - Students in special schools have no opportunity for inclusion/integration into mainstream classes
    - Completely isolated
  - Greatly simplified curriculum taught
    - Substandard education

# What happens after special school?

- Education in Slovakia is mandatory until age 15.
- After completing primary school, two options:
  - Two or three year vocation school
  - High school
- For graduates of special schools, there are special “practical” schools.
  - Provide some vocational training, but do not award certification.
- Graduates of special schools are not prohibited from attending vocational or high schools, but they are rarely able to pass entrance exams.
  - Fewer than 10% of special school graduates continue to practical school
- Most jobs require a vocational certificate at minimum
  - For graduates of special schools (and practical schools), most jobs are out of reach.

# How many Roma in special schools?

- Collection of ethnic data is prohibited in Slovakia
  - Exact figures are unknown
- Slovak Ministry of Education refers to “socially disadvantaged students” to describe Romani children.
  - These students account for 64% of students in special schools.
- European Roma Rights Centre: A Romani child is **27 times more likely** to be placed in a special school than a non-Romani child in a similar situation.

# Why are Romani children placed in special schools?

- Direct discrimination
- Language barriers
- Parents' choice
- Financial motivations
- Socially disadvantaged



# Direct Discrimination

- Un-standardized placement
  - Standardized diagnostic test was introduced in 2005
    - However, schools can use other tools to determine placement
- School directors, teachers, and psychologists can recommend a student for special education regardless of his/her performance on diagnostic tests.

# Language barriers

- Some Romani children do not speak Slovak
  - Particularly an issue with children from segregated settlements
  - Speak only Romani language at home
- Language barrier may prohibit children from performing well on placement tests or from participating in mainstream classes.
- Slovak as a second language classes are not offered in ***any primary school*** in Slovakia.
  - Only one school in Slovakia teaches classes in Romani language
    - High school for gifted and talented Roma

# “The Roma School”

- Some parents choose to send their children to special schools
  - Already high enrollment of Roma
  - Lack of multi-cultural education in mainstream schools
    - Some parents believe that their children will receive a more culturally sensitive education in an environment with other Romani children
    - Often do not recognize that the education is inferior

# Financial motivations

- Schools are funded on a per-student basis
  - Students have been recruited from Roma communities by special school staff
    - Entice them to send their children to the “Roma school”
- Motivational scholarships
  - Prior to the 2008 School Act (reform), motivational scholarships were given to socially disadvantaged students as a reward for good grades
  - No distinction between good grades at special school or good grades at mainstream school
    - Some parents chose to send their children to special schools
    - Easier to receive good grades
    - Supplement family's income
- Motivational scholarships were replaced by financial incentives based on incentives
  - Still no distinction between special schools and mainstream schools, but removed the incentive to send children to special schools

# Disadvantaged from the beginning

- As many as 150,000 Roma live in settlements
  - When children begin school, they are unprepared for educational environment
    - Basic needs are not being met
    - Parents often lack resources to provide pre-school preparation at home

# Implications of this de-facto segregation

- Economically, Roma were biggest losers of democratic transition in 1990s
  - First to lose jobs, last to be hired
  - As many as 90% of Roma currently unemployed
- Neglect and under-education of subsequent generations will only make the situation worse
  - Students are undereducated
  - Unprepared for competitive employment and prevented from integration into the labor market
  - Continues the cycle of unemployment, poverty, and marginalization

# Efforts made by the Slovak government

- Leveling the playing field
  - Assistants for “socially disadvantaged students”
  - Zero year classes
- Decade of Roma Inclusion
  - Integrated school system

# Special assistants

- Assistants for “socially disadvantaged students”
  - Provide extra educational assistance
    - Tutoring in and out of class
    - Translation assistance during placement test
  - Provide additional assistance as needed
    - Transportation to and from school
    - Communication with parents
- Extremely beneficial
- Too few assistants
  - 500-800
  - Too few spread out among 600 special schools



# “Zero year” classes

- Established in 2008
- One year of state funded pre-kindergarten
  - Similar to the Head Start Program in the US
  - Provides:
    - Educational services
    - Transportation
    - Meals
    - Assistance with hygiene
    - Material needs
- 2000 students participated in zero year classes in 2008
  - Successful model, but is under-funded and undeveloped

# Decade of Roma Inclusion

- Decade of Roma Inclusion: 2005-2015
  - Multinational project (12 European countries) designed to promote inclusion of Roma
- Slovakia is current president
  - An “integrated school system” is one of the top three priority areas
  - 10% of special schools will be audited to monitor discrimination
    - However, since ethnic data cannot be collected, an accurate representation of Romani children will be difficult to assess.

# International attention

- 2007, Czech Republic:
  - European Court of Human Rights ruled that the placement of 18 Romani children in special schools was discrimination and a violation of their right to education.
  - Set a precedent that segregation of Romani children is unacceptable under the European Convention.
  - Increased international attention in Slovakia, but to date, there have been no similar legal actions taken.

# For more information:

- Amnesty International
  - [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)
  - “A Tale of Two Schools”
- European Roma Rights Centre
  - [www.errc.org](http://www.errc.org)
- National Democratic Institute (NDI)
  - [www.ndi.org](http://www.ndi.org)
- Milan Simecka Foundation
  - [www.nadaciamilanasimecku.sk](http://www.nadaciamilanasimecku.sk)



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